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OPINION

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Scrap ANZUS?

ONE of the saddest little contretemps to afflict the Western alliance is coming to a head.

It involves the relationship of the United States with New Zealand, but also has significant effects on Australia. All three countries have long been parties to the ANZUS treaty, a mutual-defense pact now hanging by a thread as a result of recent actions by the New Zealand government.

New Zealand might at first glimpse appear inconsequential in the scheme of international diplomatic and defense strategy. Far off in the South Pacific, it is tranquil, beautiful, prosperous, democratic; it does not feel threatened; and it threatens nobody else.

Its population, descended mainly from the British, is small, but that has not prevented New Zealanders from leaving the security of their island paradise over the years to defend their values and take on causes they considered just. Thus New Zealanders wrote proud chapters in far-off lands in World Wars I and II. They were in Korea. And Vietnam.

They have cared about others in the Western alliance, and others have cared about them.

Although they have long had sentimental ties with Britain, the realities of shifting power after World War II caused New Zealanders, with Australians, to look increasingly to the United States for a military alliance in the Pacific. Thus was the ANZUS alliance born.

All this trickled along satisfactorily until the advent in 1984 of a new government in New Zealand headed by Prime Minister David Lange. Mr. Lange proclaimed traditional friendship with Washington. He professed support for the alliance. But his party championed an antinuclear policy. It was eager to bar all nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships from New Zealand's waters.

This posed a problem for the US, whose naval vessels had traditionally made port calls in New Zealand. An increasing number of American warships are now nuclear powered. As to weaponry, the US has an ironclad rule never to divulge which ships are carrying nuclear weapons; to do so would give any enemy a list of preferred targets.

The initial American tactic was to give Mr. Lange time to work things out. American officials thought they were getting signals from him that this was what he wanted. Meanwhile, New Zealand officials were given extensive background information on the accident-free record of American nuclear vessels. Eventually, the US offered up for a port call the destroyer Buchanan, a vessel powered by conventional, not nuclear, engines. In keeping with its rule, however, the United States would not confirm or deny whether the Buchanan was carrying nuclear weaponry. New Zealand barred the visit.

Since then, the relationship has gone downhill. While the US has been careful to assure New Zealand that it is still a friend, it has been treating it less and less like an ally. The US has suspended maneuvers with New Zealand, cut it off from intelligence information, and virtually suspended defense ties.

The US contends it cannot continue treating a nation as an ally when it stops behaving like one. There is also a deeper concern. If New Zealand is allowed to bar American naval vessels with impunity, other nations — Australia, Japan, and so on — might follow suit. Such a ban would badly hinder the US Navy's ability to operate around the world.

Now, however, Mr. Lange is apparently intent on enacting legislation in August that would formally bar visits by nuclear-powered or nuclear-armed ships. The United States has informed him that if that happens, it will scrap its 35-year-old defense commitment to New Zealand.

That would be a sad development. Like any large and rambunctious family, the Western alliance has its ups and downs. But united defense of the values that hold it together has worked pretty well against a variety of threats in an often dangerous world.

New Zealand should think again before it cuts itself loose.